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A NOTE ON THE ROLE OF THE EARLY KARMA PAS AT KARMA'I DGON (1182 - CA. 1363)

ROBERTO VITALI

Karma dBu se or Dus gsum mkhyen pa (1110-1193), the first Zhwa nag pa, is renowned, among his great achievements, for founding the three most important Karma pa monasteries. These endeavours spanned several decades in his life. He established Kam po gNas nang in Li thang, the monastery of his maturity, in 1164 and sTod lung mTshur phu, the monastery of his old age, in 1189. In the intervening period he gave impulse to the construction of Karma'i dgon, situated in the lower part of Zla yul, a land crossed by the Zla chu, which, downstream, is one of the two rivers of future Chab mdo. The three monasteries are known as *gdan sa gong ma*, *bar ma* and *'og ma*.

Despite their importance, Kam po gNas nang and Karma'i dgon have not received a space in the literature like the one reserved to mTshur phu which is popularly considered to be the great monastic focal point in the history of the Karma kam tshang school. This is true especially for the later period of Karma pa history. The other two great institutions were of maximum importance, in particular during the school's earlier period. Here, given the brevity of this paper, I will just look at the first four Karma pa's work at Karma'i dgon, one of several topics of historical interest about the monastery.

In the year of the water tiger 1182, Dus gsum mkhyen pa returned from dBu, where he was last at 'Bri gung, and travelled to Tre bo. He then went back to Zla yul via 'Bri klung (*Dus gsum mkhyen pa'i rnam thar gser gling ma*: 76,3-77,2; *Karma pa'i gnas bstod snyan grags*: 24,8-10; *Karma'i dgon gyi lo rgyus*: 4b5-6). He retraced his steps from east to west and reached a location in this area, where he recognised the extraordinary signs prophesied to him a long time before by his teacher Dwags po lHa rje sGam po pa (1079-1153). He saw features typical of a future holy place and had a vision of *dpa' bos* and *mkha' 'gro mas* on its meadow, known as 'Bum thang (*ibidem*: 5a2). *Dus gsum mkhyen pa'i rnam thar gser gling ma* by his disciple sGang lo tsa ba, the oldest and most important biography of the first Karma pa, says that the locality was Kle'u Kar ma (*ibidem*: 77,2); others mostly spell it Gle thu (e.g. *Karma'i dgon gyi lo rgyus*: 4b5-6; *Karma pa'i gnas bstod snyan grags*: 24,9).

Despite being reluctant to let him found anything, for they feared that they would be dispossessed of their area, thus preventing them from grazing their cattle, the local 'brog pas eventually consented to Dus gsum mkhyen pa's wish. Having obtained permission from them to build a small house, he made for himself just a hut (*Karma'i dgon gyi lo rgyus*: 5a6-5b2). *Karma'i dgon gyi lo rgyus* implies that those involved in the negotiation were more than a single group of herdsmen, whereas *Dus gsum mkhyen pa'i rnam mthar gser gling ma* talks about only one.

The local 'brog pas' resistance was seemingly removed by the intervention of an unidentified local authority, symbolised by a young man, defined as the *nags kyi*

bdag po (“lord of the grove”). This is a rare, indirect sign of the secular status that prevailed in the area of Karma in the last quarter of the 12th century, control of which was in the hands of a local power higher than its *'brog pa* inhabitants.

The reference to water tiger 1182 is a detail which has some historical weight, for it antedates by three years the commonly recognised foundation of Karma'i dgon. Furthermore, it helps to understand the initial nature of this holy place meant for meditation purposes. The rather unassuming extent of this foundation may account for the lack of an accurate chronological assessment in most sources, despite the fact that Dus gsum mkhyen pa, by giving teachings at Gle'u Karma, attracted a number of disciples during that period (*ibidem* 5b2-3). The pattern of the initial establishment of Karma echoes that of gDan sa mthil by his contemporary Phag mo gru pa rDo rje rgyal po (1110-1190), a quarter of a century earlier in 1158, but with a substantial difference. Following this initial step, Dus gsum mkhyen pa involved his heart disciple 'gro mgon Ras chen, a native of Yar lung, in his plan to transform this meditation place into a monastery. As in other cases in the relations between teacher and disciples, Dus gsum mkhyen pa laid the foundation of the temple at Karma but its actual construction was delegated to 'gro mgon Ras chen.

It was in 1185 that Dus gsum mkhyen pa laid the foundations of the *gdan sa* (*ibidem* 6a2-3), and made arrangements towards building a fully fledged monastic institution there. This is possibly why Tibetan historiography carries this date for the foundation of Karma'i dgon. Upon entrusting the task to his disciple, Dus gsum mkhyen pa stressed the importance of Karma'i dgon, which he associated with Kam po gNas nang and mTshur phu in a visionary exercise, typical of himself. Past (Kam po gNas nang), present (Karma'i dgon) and future (mTshur phu) were seen by him as a continuous unfolding of foundations undertaken (*ibidem*: 6a4-5).

Dus gsum mkhyen pa left for dBus after choosing 'gro mgon Ras chen as Karma'i dgon's first abbot. Despite the stereotype that assigns the foundation of Karma'i dgon to Dus gsum mkhyen pa, one should not forget that Jo bo Ras chen brought the first *lha khang* at Karma to completion (*Karma pa'i gnas bstod snyan grags*: 25, 15-16), namely Karma'i gdan sa Khyom chen (“greatly irregular [in shape]”) (*Karma'i dgon gyi lo rgyus*: 6b3-4).

Deb ther sngon po (573,7-9) says that 'gro mgon Ras chen spent three years with Dus gsum mkhyen pa at Karma and escorted him up to Tre shod upon his teacher's departure for dBus. Given the dates of Dus gsum khyen pa's sojourns at Kle'u Karma, he and 'gro mgon Ras chen must have resided at this locality from 1182 to 1185. 'Gro mgon Ras chen was witness to the Karma Khyom chen project of his teacher, completing it after the latter's departure.

Dus gsum mkhyen pa felt obliged to accomplish three major tasks in dBus, assigned to him by Dwags po sGom Tshul (1116-1169) several years earlier (*Deb ther sngon po*: 569,18-570,4):

- to bring a great offering of books written in gold to Dwags lha sgam po, the monastery of the first Karma pa's teacher sGam po pa;
- to pacify the animosity created by the aggressive behaviour of his bKa' brgyud pa colleague, Zhang g.Yu brag pa (1123-1193 or 1194), which he thought brought disrepute to their common school (and one should stress the attitude of Dus gsum mkhyen pa *vis-à-vis* the conduct of the Tshal pa master); and

- to build mTshur phu in the area between gZhu and sTod lung (*Karma'i dgon gyi lo rgyus*: 6a6-6b2). A fourth reason is given in some sources (for instance *mKhas pa'i dga' ston*: 864,21-22), that of spending time in meditation.

A ceremony to mourn Dus gsum mkhyen pa's passing, held at Karma'i dgon a few years later, was the occasion for 'gro mgon Ras chen to endow the monastery with great religious supports (a statue of Sangs rgyas and another of Dus gsum mkhyen pa, and *mchod rtens*) (*ibidem*: 6b5-7a3). Another of 'gro mgon Ras chen's accomplishments at Kle'u Karma was the opening of the door of Karma lHa steng. In doing so he gave a prophecy that there would be a hermitage, a monastery and a monastic community there in the future (*ibidem*: 7a3-4).

The initial phase in the history of Karma'i dgon, marked by the activities of Dus gsum mkhyen pa and 'gro mgon Ras chen, came to an end after the abbotship of a few masters. The earliest was dBang gi rdo rje, a disciple of the first Karma pa, whose tenure occurred when sPom brag pa, the master famous for having recognised Karma Pakshi as Dus gsum mkhyen pa's next birth, was at the monastery (*ibidem*: 7b1-2); rGya Blo gros rin chen and then mkhas grub dBang ba succeeded dBang gi rdo rje (*ibidem*: 7b5).

The next *gdan sa*, dBas ston, neglected Karma'i dgon in favour of a strict hermit life, which led to a rebuke by Karma Pakshi (1204 or 1206 or 1210-1283) (*ibidem*: 7b6-8a2). Following the invitation of Go pe la (1215-1294, the future Se chen rgyal po r. 1260-1294), the second Karma pa, on his way to Hor yul in order to meet Mong gor rgyal po (r. 1250-1259), had indeed sojourned at Karma'i dgon (*Karma kam tshang brgyud pa'i rnam thar*: 143,12-17). This happened either in late 1254 or early 1255 (*Karma kam tshang gser phreng*: 104,4-7).

After his stay in Hor yul culminating with the ordeal inflicted upon him by Se chen rgyal po, Karma Pakshi travelled slowly back to Central Tibet in the 1260s. It took him eight years to reach his destination (mkha' spyod dbang po, *Karma pakshi'i rnam thar*: 70,2); on the way, he returned to Karma'i dgon. Meaningfully, he performed a ritual to avoid threats of future attacks by hostile troops (*Karma kam tshang brgyud pa'i rnam thar*: 143,17-20).

He was offered the monastery by its abbot Dar ma grags who, in the meantime, had repaired the neglect of his predecessor, dBas ston. Karma Pakshi's presence led to renewed efforts, owing to his focus on expanding and strengthening the religious institutions founded by his previous birth rather than building his own. This happened at all the three holy places established by Dus gsum mkhyen pa.

He developed Karma'i dgon into a larger institution (*Karma'i dgon gyi lo rgyus*: 8a2-3). He made images of the Buddha of the Past and Future, which he installed in gDan sa bar ma and [gDan sa] 'og ma (*ibidem*: 8a5-6; *mKhas pa'i dga' ston*: 900,22-901,2). The passage shows that, in the days of the Pakshi at Karma'i dgon, the monastery was already composed of at least two of its three main monastic complexes; the founders of which are not identified in the sources. Assuming that the *gdan sa* founded by Dus gsum mkhyen pa and completed by 'gro mgon Ras chen was only one, another one should be ascribed either to an abbot before Karma Pakshi (mkhas pa dBang gi rdo rje, rGya Blo gros rin chen, mkhas grub dBang ba and dBas ston) or to the second Zhwa nag pa.

Karma Pakshi received a directive from his *yi dam* Thugs rje chen po to make a statue of Byams pa, which he completed before leaving for mTshur pu (*Karma pakshi'i rang rnam*: 106,4-6; *Karma kam tshang brgyud pa'i rnam thar*: 143,4-12).

The second Karma pa's taking hold of Karma'i dgon marked the inception of a new phase in the history of the monastery. Karma Pakshi entrusted it to his nephews spyan snga sTa shod pa and 'Jam dbyangs blo gros seng ge in succession (*Karma'i dgon gyi lo rgyus*: 8a3-4). Since then and for quite a long time, Karma'i dgon remained in the orbit of Karma Pakshi's family. 'Jam dbyangs blo gros seng ge was an abbot of some importance who set up a network of eighteen holy places, branches of Karma'i dgon, names of which are not recorded in *Karma'i dgon gyi lo rgyus*.

The dates of the sojourn of the third Karma pa, Rang byung rdo rje (1284-1339), at Karma'i dgon can be ascertained with the help of the years he travelled from Tibet to Hor yul and back—respectively 1332 and 1334 (*bsTan rtsis kun las btus pa*: 199, 200). On his visit of 1332 he performed a ritual to ingratiate the local guardian (*zo dor gnyen po*) (*ibidem*: 9b4-5) in order to remove obstacles, the nature of which is undescribed, and introduced an extremely numerous group of meditators to the combined *zhi lhag* practice (“mental calm and intuitive clarity”) (*mKhas pa'i dga' ston*: 938,1-2). He built the g.Yan mo che dormitory and a slate house. He urged the people at Karma'i dgon to establish a meditation place and a monastery at lHa steng (*Karma'i dgon gyi lo rgyus*: 10a1-2). As he was on his way to Hor yul, he did not involve himself in such activities.

In 1334, he returned to Karma'i dgon and imparted great teachings on *Phyag chen*, *Chos drug*, *'Dus 'khor* and *sByor drug*. Its abbot Gangs dgon pa Kun dga' rin chen had fulfilled his wish in the meantime. He had established a meditation community on Karma ri, the mountain overlooking the monastery, which became known as Karma ri gling, and had made a fully fledged monastic complex of lHa steng. Rang byung rdo rje supervised the *gtsug lag khang* and personally made statues of Ber nag can and Śākyamuni, both in white sandalwood, before leaving for dBus gTsang. Having come to Karma'i dgon from sMar khams, he left for 'Dam after these activities, where he arrived in mid 1335 (*mKhas pa'i dga' ston*: 941,3-4).

The fourth Karma pa, Rol pa'i rdo rje (1340-1383), is remembered for a miraculous performance at Karma'i dgon, which led to the recovery of a most sacred object of the Karma pa school. In those days the meditative tradition of the monastery was carried on by many hermits in walled reclusion on Karma ri gling. The legend holds that the Karma pa transformed into seven Bal po *a tsa ra*. They went to see *si tu* A rya pa, the Karma'i dgon abbot, who was in deep meditation. The *a tsa ras* entrusted his *nye gnas* with a small pot to be forwarded to his *bla ma* and said they would proceed to Ri bo rtse lnga and to see Rol pa'i rdo rje. They would collect the pot upon their return or, if they did not gather again at Karma'i dgon in the future, the abbot should keep it. This legend has several common points with the account of how the two silver statues at the sides of the Khwa char jo bo came into being in the early 13th century to compose the famous triad of this temple in Pu hrang.

The seven transformations opened the door of the Ba thang shing hermitage and found a *gandho la*, which had gone untraced in the meantime, at Sindhu ra'i phug pa (“the Cave of Vermillion”), the *gter gnas* of *gter ston* Ma ti ratna's Seng gdong dmar mo (“*dākinī* with a red lioness face”). When Rol pa'i rdo rje returned to Karma'i dgon and asked A rya pa whether seven *a tsa ras* had left a small pot with him, the abbot handed it over to the Karma pa. The *gandho la*, originally a *gter ma* rediscovery by Dus gsum mkhyen pa, miraculously appeared from within it. It was the personal object of veneration of the first four Zhwa nag incarnations. Rol pa'i

rdo rje brought it to sGar, his tent, and then to mTshur phu (on all this, see *Karma'i dgon gyi lo rgyus*: 10a2-11a3).

The same legend is told differently in *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* (p. 958,15-22). It was five *yogis* from rGya gar, the transformations of the *chos skyong*, who entrusted a leaf of the Bodhi tree, engraved by Nāgārjuna, to the Karma pa until they would gather again with him. They added the *gandho la* of his previous incarnations.

While he was at Karma'i dgon, Rol pa'i rdo rje gave a silver seal, a document of ownership ('*dzin yig*) and a letter of protection (*bsrung yig*) to *si tu* A rya pa, issued for the Karma'i dgon abbot by the emperor Tho gan thi mur. These events occurred around 1363, for Rol pa'i rdo rje, who went to mDo Khams in 1358 and left for China in 1360 (*bsTan rtsis kun las btus pa*: 204, 205), returned to Tibet in that year and went twice to the monastery (*Karma kam tshang gser 'phreng*: 372,3-372,2-3). Earlier (in 1358), he had sojourned at Karma'i dgon (*ibidem*: 353,4-354,2), and removed the harm of locusts in the area on that occasion (*Deb ther sngon po*: 593,9-13).

The one brought to Karma'i dgon by Rol pa'i rdo rje around 1363 was the last Yuan endowment to the great Karma pa monastery before the downfall of the dynasty. The custom whereby Yuan emperors supported the monastery was introduced with a grant from Se chen rgyal po in favour of the Karma'i dgon abbot of the time, Karma Pakshi's nephew 'Jam dbyangs blo gros seng ge, sometime after the second Karma pa had left Zla yul. With the creation of the network of eighteen monasteries depending on Karma'i dgon during his abbotship, their religious influence extended to 'Bri rgyud, Zla yul stod smad and Ngom (*Karma'i dgon gyi lo rgyus*: 8b2-3), to which Khyung po, where sTa shod pa's monastery sTa/rTa shod stood, must be added. This impinged on territories controlled by other local powers, such as the one in the land of the Ngom chu.

Following the first phase incepted by Dus gsum mkhyen pa in 1182, when he was able to obtain the consent of a local authority, superior to the herdsmen of Kle'u Karma, the history of Karma'i dgon was influenced in successive periods by Karma Pakshi's decision to assign its care to members of his family, the dBu. The Pakshi's kinsmen provided the Karma'i dgon abbots for some 200 years up to the end of the 15th century, during the time of the seventh Karma pa Chos grags rgya mtsho (1450-1506). Then the lineage of Karma Pakshi's descendants ceased to sit on Karma'i dgon's abbatial throne. I wonder whether this was due to the untimely passing of the child abbot rje Mi bskyod (*ibidem*: 14b5-15a1), or if it depended on a change of fortunes at the imperial court. It was probably a combination of the two factors, although nothing is said on this matter in the sources.

Se chen rgyal po's grant in favour of Karma'i dgon occurring outside the Zhwa nag pa succession of rebirths—was the emperor's choice dictated by the hostility he nurtured for the second Karma pa, despite a formal rapprochement after his failed attempts to finish him off?—was reformed with the involvement of successive Zhwa nag pa rebirths (Rang byung rdo rje and Rol pa'i rdo rje) in support to the monastery by the Yuan emperors. The imperial court kept occasional contact with various Karma'i dgon abbots in case the successive Karma pa incarnations were unable to take care of the monastery.

The system passed into different imperial hands with the Ming dynasty, but not before a hiatus in the maintenance of the monastery from the end of the Yuan in 1368 to the time of the Yung-lo emperor (r. 1402-1424), which coincided with the

reign of the first Ta Ming, Hung-wu (r. 1368-1398). Upkeep of Karma'i dgon with imperial support was revived by the fifth Karma pa De bzhin gshegs pa (1384-1415) in 1409 (*Karma kam tshang gser 'phreng*: 471,7), after visits to the monastery in his early years (1392 and 1393) (*ibidem*: 450,3, 451,1-2). The political background had undergone a remarkable change but the fortunes of Karma'i dgon, despite ups and downs, continued unabated.

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